

[Melgarsh Village]

THE POLYANDRY OF THE TODAS OF THE NILGIRIS

295

as they had given up of their own accord when the taste of Erzigwuf's milk changed, due to her advanced pregnancy. 862

Somewhat incredulous of Erzigwuf's assertions as they were made to me, I questioned the local medical practitioner of Ootacamund, Colonel D'Souza, Indian Medical Service (rtd.) about their veracity. He assured me that it was quite possible. He said, even, that it did not tire the mother, as after some time "it becomes mechanical". Colonel D'Souza also assured me that the contention often heard that prolonged suckling prevents conception was a fallacy completely disproved by facts, "at least in Asia". Erzigwuf also told me that Sodup and Sodam were born after she had not had any menses for eight years; two days after, however, she contradicted herself and said this was not correct (she said she had made "a mistake"). But another time she assured me that Toda women cease having any sort of periods for four months after they have given birth; that is why, she said, they cannot have children earlier - she herself had been like this. Although I do not much believe in this assertion, which is contrary to every ordinary observation anywhere, I give it here for what it is worth. 853

Small children suck their thumbs very early, Erzigwuf asserted. As a proof, she showed me one of the new-born twins, fast asleep in her lap with its thumb in its mouth. For napkins, she used bits of cloth which she regularly changed and washed. She said that she taught her children to be clean after six months. Before that, she would take them out at regular intervals and hold them in her hands, both boy and girl. Then, after, she would teach them gradually to go out by themselves, punishing them by beating them on the buttocks with a stinging nettle (called *sworkh* in Toda) when they misbehaved in the house, and rewarding them with sweets when they were good and did as they were told. They learned very quickly, in approximately one month. 854

Regarding genital development, Erzigwuf was very outspoken, and I had no difficulty in getting information from her, even in the presence of Narjilkh and Pengelam, who would listen with interest to the conversation through Kanvarsathi-Sunderdoss, my interpreter. She said that masturbation started very early - at about nine months. They play with their genitals, both boys and girls, but the former more so, all the time; when walking, suckling and lying down, as she put it. When they get older, this play is intensified, and after they have reached the age of one year, she intervenes to stop it. She did so, she said, and not Mutnarsh who "lets the children do anything they want". Asked why she did not allow them to carry on freely, she said, because if she did not forbid 863

[861]
[824]

864

[Melgarsh Village]

296

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

864 them to do this they would a) continue when adult, b) spoil their health by doing so. The method for overcoming the "evil" is to administer
[861] *tworh* on the genitals, as on the buttocks for insanitary lapses. (Incidentally Ersigwuf admitted that she also made use of these nettles on
[824] the mouths of her children when they bit her, and on their fingers, when they pinched her and pulled her hair.) Masturbation, as a result, is less intensive, but does, all the same, continue, she said, until the fourth year. Then there is a period of calm (latency?) until the twelfth year.

My interpreter here put in his own version. He said that Erzigwuf was not telling the truth, and that he had observed other things with his own children. They carried on with masturbation until the ninth year inclusive, and what was apparently latency, thus lasted for only three years. He also mentioned that in his day the punishments employed
[861] were much more drastic. A horrible one that he remembers consisted of having the wrists tied behind the back, the cloak fastened tightly over arms and legs and to be put, thus trussed up, at the entrance to the buffalo pen when the animals rushed out either in the morning or in the evening. It was here that Kanvarsathi told me that Pangur, the adult
[828] son of the Teivilkh chieftain Piliar of Kuur *mad*, had never really given
[839] up masturbating because, in his opinion, he had been too repressed in his activity as a child and had thus never grown out of the habit.

836 Premarital relations between young people after puberty are not discouraged with the Todas, provided they take place within the permissible marital rules of the tribe, i.e. outside the *polkhlol* and *modol*, but
[835] within the moiety. Thus, premarital relations with a *matchuni* are considered quite normal, and should a child result from them, there is no harm done, as, officially, they are not premarital realations at all, but those of a wedded couple, even if the marriage took place in very early childhood.

I asked Erzigwuf if Pershrörsh, the eldest boy, who had attained the age of puberty, had any relations with girls, and her answer was that he probably had, as he was most of the time away from Melgarsh and she could not get him to stay, although she had asked him to, since Mutnarsh was very busy in the Botanical Gardens. Narjikh, she said, was too young for such things, and Pengelam also, although the latter, a girl, would be watched more as she grew older.

845 Three days after the family had entered the *puzharsh*, I went to see
123 them come out and return to the *mad*. I noticed that of the two newborn twins, the boy looked very *mad*, while the girl was strong and healthy. In order to keep the little one alive, and because Erzigwuf was